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Contested space: The contradictory political dynamics of food banking in the UK

Andrew Williams¹²

Cardiff University, UK

Paul Cloke

University of Exeter, UK

Jon May

Queen Mary University of London, UK

Mark Goodwin

University of Exeter, UK

¹ Corresponding author: Andrew Williams, School of Geography and Planning, Cardiff University, King Edward VII Avenue, Cardiff CF10 3WA, UK. Email: WilliamsAPJ@cardiff.ac.uk

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Abstract

This paper offers a critical reappraisal of the politics of food banking in the UK. Existing work has raised concerns about the institutionalisation of food banks, with charitable assistance apparently – even if inadvertently – undermining collectivist welfare and deflecting attention from fundamental injustices in the food system. This paper presents original ethnographic work that examines the neglected politics articulated within food banks themselves. Conceptualising food banks as potential spaces of encounter where predominantly middle-class volunteers come into contact with ‘poor others’ (Lawson and Elwood, 2013), we illustrate the ways food banks may both reinforce but also rework and generate new, ethical and political attitudes, beliefs and identities. We also draw attention to the limits of these progressive possibilities and examine the ways in which some food banks continue to operate within a set of highly restrictive, and stigmatising, welfare technologies. By highlighting the contradictory dynamics at work in food bank organisations, and among food bank volunteers and clients, we suggest the political role of food banks warrants neither uncritical celebration nor outright dismissal. Rather, food banks represent a highly ambiguous political space still in the making and open to contestation.

Keywords

Food banks, neoliberalism, welfare, volunteering, encounter, political sensibilities

Introduction

This paper examines the politics of food banking in the UK in a context where the rapid rise of emergency food provision, especially via food banks, has generated significant public and political debate (see Perry et al., 2014). In the academic literature, the political positioning of food banking has most often been considered through the critical lens of food security (Dowler and O'Connor, 2012; Lambie-Mumford, 2013) and anti-neoliberal scholarship derived from the US–Canadian context (Riches, 2002). Both perspectives, in different ways, emphasise the state's legal obligation to ensure access to nutritious, safe and affordable food, and caution that whilst emergency food providers may meet the immediate 'symptoms' of food insecurity, they may also – even if inadvertently – further injustices in the wider food system, and re-enforce the continuing neoliberalisation of welfare (Carson, 2014; Lambie-Mumford, 2013; Riches, 2002; Riches and Silvasti, 2014; Tarasuk et al., 2014).

In the UK, the evidence base for this debate is limited: with the few empirical studies to date (Lambie, 2011) mainly restricted to analyses of the scale, scope and operational procedures of Britain's largest food bank franchise, the Trussell Trust. Yet, surprisingly little attention has been paid to the politics of the Trussell Trust and other food bank providers, and to the political construction of food banking more widely (but see Lambie-Mumford and Dowler, 2014; Wells and Caraher, 2014). In this paper, we chart the development of food banking as a politicised space of public debate. We explore this debate within the wider public sphere of the UK newspaper press, and within the 'micro-publics' constructed by food banks and their volunteers, arguing the importance of examining the myriad ways in which these wider political constructions of food poverty are articulated, experienced and contested 'on the ground'. Drawing on interviews and ethnographic observation conducted over 18 months inside a Trussell Trust foodbank in South of England, we examine the ambiguous and contradictory dynamics at work in food banking organisations and among food bank volunteers. A Trussell Trust foodbank was deliberately chosen given the Trust's dominant position in national political debate on food poverty; their scale of operations – amounting for no less than 54% of the UK food bank provision (May et al., 2014) and their pervasive but oft uncritically accepted use of a referral and voucher system. Through this analysis, we draw attention to the ways food bank organisations appear to have become increasingly politicised in recent years, and to the capacity for food bank spaces to open out spaces of encounter (Lawson and Elwood, 2013) that rework existing, or generate new, political and ethical subjectivities and mobilisations. However, we also draw attention to the limits of such progressive possibilities and illustrate the ways in which some food banks continue to operate within a set of highly restrictive, and stigmatising, welfare technologies that work to reinforce constructions of the deserving and undeserving welfare claimant and the dangers of 'welfare dependency'. Focusing upon the ways in which these contradictory dynamics are currently being worked through on a day-to-day basis, we argue that the political role of food banks neither warrants uncritical celebration nor outright dismissal; but rather presents a highly ambiguous political space still in the making.

Food banking, food security and neoliberalism

In recent years, attention has focused on the messy and ambivalent politics of voluntary welfare organisations (see DeVerteuil, 2014; Evans, 2011; May and Cloke, 2014; Williams et al., 2012). Within this field, geographers have highlighted the multiple, often contradictory, geographies at work in spaces of welfare and care (Cloke et al., 2010; also see Conradson, 2003; Darling, 2011) and the need

to consider the diverse ways in which welfare spaces are constructed, experienced, negotiated and contested on the ground. One effect of such work has been to draw attention to the complex ethical and political positions articulated in voluntary or faith-based welfare services which are still too often considered as little more than the handmaidens of neoliberal welfare restructuring (see May and Cloke, 2014). Following this lead, food banks too can be conceptualised as both an attempt to respond to the violence of austerity (Lambie-Mumford et al., 2014; Marie-Hall, 2015), providing important 'spaces of care, sustenance and survival' (DeVerteuil and Wilton, 2009 cited in Miewald and McCann, 2014) in the face of continued cuts to collectivist welfare provision; and as covering up for those cuts and drawing on and re-enforcing key technologies of neoliberal welfare (Trudeau and Veronis, 2009). In doing so food banks represent important spaces of encounter between individuals of differing backgrounds and within which dominant discourses of poverty may be reproduced, reinforced or challenged (see Duffy et al., 2006; Lawson and Elwood, 2013; Miewald and McCann, 2014; Valentine, 2008).

For the most part, however, academic discussions over the politics and utility of food banking have been framed within the approaches of anti-neoliberal and food security scholarship which position food banking in very particular and, we would argue, limited ways. Though it is important to note significant distinctions within these literatures around, for example, discussions of food sovereignty, food justice, the Right to Food and Food Security (see, for example, Agyeman and McEntree, 2014; Heynen et al., 2012; Mares and Alkon, 2011 on distinctions between food sovereignty, food justice, Right to Food and Food Security), these otherwise different perspectives tend to position food banking within one of four key narratives, each of which points to the limited utility if not also damaging politics of food banking.

The first of these narratives argues that charitable food assistance depoliticises problems of food insecurity, by apparently meeting the need for emergency food without confronting the systemic injustices that lead to problems of hunger in developed countries. Hence, a key concern in food security literatures, for example, is the implication of food banking in the wider injustices of corporate agribusiness and private philanthropy. Much of this debate has been informed by the food bank industry in North America (Riches, 2002, 2011), which collects and redistributes surplus food donated by for-profit growers, manufacturers, distributors and retailers. Here, concerns have been raised that the reliance of food banks on donations from the corporate sector and supermarkets can work to legitimise wider injustices in food production and retail. As Dowler (2013) has argued, in relation to the UK, for example:

the only way retailers and others can try to keep food prices down (and most big supermarkets compete on low price) is by causing more problems to those who work in the food sector, here and elsewhere – and this compounds the problems of low wages and unstable jobs. Low wages and job instabilities are contributing to rising numbers having to use food banks. (Dowler, 2013: 4)

From both food security and food sovereignty perspectives, an overreliance on capitalist philanthropy and corporate agribusiness not only risks hiding from view deeply entrenched and exploitative labour relations and environmental practices but also reduces our collective ability to imagine and reshape relationships of food production and consumption towards more socially and ecologically just transformations (see De Shutter, 2013; Riches and Silvasti, 2014).

The second, and perhaps most dominant narrative in human geography, argues that food banking inadvertently serves as a smokescreen for government to shirk responsibility to its citizens and institutionalises charitable forms of support in place of universal state welfare (Poppendieck, 1998; Riches, 1986). Through this lens, third sector involvement in emergency food provision has typically been viewed as caught up in the wider incorporation of voluntary sector organisations and resources in the vacuum left by retreating central and local state welfare provision (Goode, 2006; Hackworth, 2009, 2010; Peck and Tickell, 2002; Trudeau and Veronis, 2009; Wolch, 1990) and represents a privatisation of political responsibility – one that enables policymakers to ‘look the other way’ (Riches, 2002: 648) and construct food poverty as a matter of charity rather than a political obligation and human right (Dowler, 2002; Riches, 1997). Within this narrative, the normalisation of food banking in the US (Poppendieck, 1998; Warshawsky, 2010), Canada (Riches, 2002; Wakefield et al., 2013) and Australia (Booth and Whelan, 2014), has come to be understood as a shadow state mechanism that gradually supplants, and draws legitimacy for, an ever diminishing welfare state (Wolch, 1990).

The third narrative concerns the role of food banks in the neoliberal subjectification of ‘the poor’. This analysis offers a more nuanced picture than that of a wholesale replacement of state welfare by third sector organisations, highlighting instead the ways in which the discourses of charity constructed in the organisational practices of food banks might serve to uphold and further embed neoliberal ideologies of welfare by elevating a *modus operandi* in keeping with dominant discourses of dependency, deservingness and self-responsibility (Goode, 2006; Hackworth, 2012; Trudeau and Veronis, 2009). Seen through this lens, the voucher systems enshrined in many food banks, for example, embed a calculation of ‘genuine need’ – thus implicitly betraying a moral judgement of who is considered ‘deserving’ and ‘undeserving’ of food assistance (see Carson, 2014). It is exactly these kind of mundane values and practices, found in many third sector organisations, that Trudeau and Veronis (2009: 1130) argue represent key ‘translation mechanisms’ enacting and materialising broader changes in the restructuring of the welfare state. In line with such arguments, Horst et al. (2014) and others (Douglas et al., 2015; Purdam et al., 2015) highlight the ‘darker side’ to food bank environments, and in particular the emotional nexus of shame, stigma, and gratitude they argue is experienced by many food aid recipients. In their account of food banks in the Netherlands, for example, Horst et al. (2014) highlight the shame many clients experience in relation to the prescribed content of near out of date and ‘surplus’ food of their food parcels, as well as in relation to their interaction with volunteers (in which clear hierarchies of provider and recipient are upheld), whilst Riches (2011) draws attention to the stigma many food bank users have to negotiate when able to access only culturally inappropriate food.

Fourth, while food banks potentially serve as sites of the subjectification of ‘clients’ through paternalist technologies and representations of deservingness, scholars have also critiqued the ethos of charity claimed and performed by volunteers and supporters of food banks. Poppendieck (1998: 298), for example, argues that food charity functions as a ‘moral safety valve’ which diminishes activism by ‘assuaging liberal guilt’, enabling volunteers and donors to feel better while vital public policy issues go unaddressed. At best, food banks inadvertently placate energies for political action that might otherwise be put towards more just alternatives, and at worse offer a particular articulation of charitable compassion entirely in keeping with neoliberal frameworks of service delivery and moral discourses of deservingness and conditionality (Muehlebach, 2012).

Taken together, these four narratives provide a highly critical but extremely useful framework through which to consider the politics of food banking, drawing attention to the potential depoliticisation of hunger and incorporation of food aid providers in wider processes of neoliberal welfare restructuring and subjectification of welfare recipients. At first sight, at least, they would also seem to offer considerable traction when thinking through the politics of food banking in the UK. For example, the UK's largest food bank provider – the Trussell Trust – relies for a significant proportion of their donations on Tesco – the UK's largest supermarket chain, which continues to reject calls to pay a Living Wage (Tadeo, 2014). Whilst many Trussell Trust food banks regularly collect at Tesco stores, in the financial year 2013–2014 12% (>408,000) of the Trussell Trust's annual income came from Tesco 'Top ups': a partnership between the Trussell Trust, Fareshare and Tesco Stores Ltd. whereby Tesco 'tops up' the food collected on bi-annual nationwide Neighbourhood Food Collections events to the value of 30% of the agreed cost of the food. Whilst food collections at Tesco (and other supermarkets) often rely on food purchased and then donated by customers, rather than drawing on surplus food or products approaching their use-by dates, and hence, more obviously simply swell the coffers of food retailers rather than challenge food waste, there is a clear irony that many supermarkets donate food to the very food banks their employees are using. Whilst such a trend has been evident in the US for some time (Kasperkevic, 2014; also see Lindenbaum, 2015; Poppendieck, 1998), it would appear to now also be the case in parts of the UK to the extent that, according to one foodbank manager in Cornwall, an estimated 40% of their foodbank clients are currently on a zero-hour or low-wage contracts, including with Tesco, a major source of local employment in the surrounding rural area.

Similarly, following the abolition of Community Care Grants and Crisis Loans alongside other changes to the Social Fund in April 2013, the expectation of central government appeared to be that UK local authorities would take responsibility for crisis provision by establishing local welfare schemes. The response of different local authorities has ranged from direct provision by the local state or having services contracted out to other organisations, to the use of Credit Unions or 'no interest' loans, prepayment cards and vouchers. Though the extent to which local authorities have directly funded food banks through 'local community grants' remains unclear (though see CPAG, 2016; Downing and Kennedy, 2013), there is growing evidence to suggest food banks are indeed becoming a permanent feature of local welfare assistance schemes, whilst since 2011 UK Job Centres have emerged as a key referral point for Trussell Trust and other food banks (see Dowler and Lambie-Mumford, 2014; McIvor and Williams, 2014). Finally, both the Trussell Trust and a number of other UK foodbanks have adopted a voucher referral system, through which a range of 'welfare professionals' are tasked with determining who is eligible for food and which is said to be based upon a standardised assessment criteria, and demonstration of evidence of 'genuine need'. The widespread public as well as political support for such systems – praised for ensuring assistance is only provided to those who are most 'deserving' of help – exemplifies the hold that neoliberal constructions of the deserving and undeserving welfare subject, and associated technologies, now enjoy (Wells and Caraher, 2014).

Nonetheless, we would argue that these analytical trajectories also overlook several important issues when assessing the political landscape of emergency food provision in the UK. First, many of these accounts narrowly focus only on the example of the UK's largest food bank franchise, the Trussell Trust, underplaying the diverse and variegated landscape of food aid in contemporary Britain (Dowler and Lambie-Mumford, 2014). According to a national survey conducted by May et al. (2014), for example, previous reports on the makeup of the UK food aid system significantly underestimate the scale and extent of independent food banks, whilst that landscape also includes a diverse range of

organisations with differing ethos, modes of operation and political outlook. Thus, in Birmingham, for example, whilst there are currently some 20 food banks, 15 operated by the Trussell Trust and a further five independent providers, a number of other organisations such as Foodcycle and Food not Bombs seek in different ways to politicise issues of food production and food waste, while the anti-austerity campaigning group UK Uncut has set up pop-up food banks in high street banks in an attempt to connect discussions of food banking with austerity and the (financial) banking crisis. Elsewhere, and in direct and conscious contradistinction to the Trussell Trust, a number of independent food banks have taken a deliberate decision not to operate a rationing/ voucher system, preferring instead to operate according to an ethos of direct access and/or unconditionality. Any assessment of the politics of food banking in the UK must therefore consider the diverse ecological and political constructions of food, charity and poverty found in different and highly varied food aid providers.

Second, when conceptualising organisational franchises such as the Trussell Trust network, it is important to recognise that different franchises may often operate quite differently – with organisational capacity, size, ways of working, clientele, donor networks, staffing and political outlook all combining to produce highly localised spaces of provision. As a result, it would appear that quite different food aid ‘scenes’ (Clope et al., 2010) may be emerging in different places according to locally distinct social-economic, cultural, religious and political milieu and that the nature and extent of any joint working between different food aid providers may vary. While there seems to be a common assumption that food banks are a big city phenomenon, for example, there is now considerable (if not much publicised) evidence of food bank growth in many small towns and rural areas in the UK (Kingdom, 2013; Williams et al., 2014a), suggesting the need to also consider differently constructed local cultures of charity in urban and rural settings and the ways in which such cultures interact with wider discourses of the rural ‘idyll’, self-reliance and mutualism which may help shape public visibility of, and organisational responses to, rural food poverty (Clope et al., 2000; Milbourne, 2004).

Third, in considering the politics articulated and experienced ‘on the ground’ in food banks, it is important to take into account the heterogeneous ways in which the organisational spaces of a food bank – its rules, practices and affective atmospheres – are performatively brought into being through the embodied interactions, and political and ethical proclivities of staff, volunteers and clients. Whilst Horst et al. (2014) offer one such reading of these dynamics, the kind of ethnographic research on which such readings must rest are still rare, with other accounts of these dynamics in other welfare service settings (Clope et al., 2010, Conradson, 2003, Darling, 2011; Williams, 2015) tracing a much more variegated picture; including examples of the ways in which dominant discourses of (paternalistic and self-serving) charity, and neoliberal technologies of rationing and subjectification, are reworked in the day-to-day encounters between organisational ethos, technologies and procedures, volunteers and clients. Longitudinal analysis of client experience, for instance, suggests food banks often come after difficult and stigmatising interviews with other kinds of welfare officials, and may sometimes be performatively easier than these previous encounters. Equally while the first visit may be difficult, subsequent visits may be a lot easier when the unknown turns into a hospitable ‘known’. Any assessment of the politics of food banking must therefore also examine the politics embodied and articulated by and within food banks themselves; whether in the work different food banks (rather than only larger food bank organisations) do to promote different understandings of the problems of food poverty to a wider public, or the negotiation of these politics within the micro-publics (Barnett, 2014; Mahony et al., 2010) emergent amongst the volunteers and clients within the food bank itself.

Lastly, prior to any outright dismissal of the inherent depoliticising tendencies of food charity providers – a viewpoint that owes much to the US and Canadian context – it is vital to develop a place-based assessment of the public and political contestation around food banking, welfare restructuring and poverty in times of austerity (Nolan and Featherstone, 2015). It is to this we now turn.

Public and political constructions of food banking in the UK

Since 2000, the rapid growth and uptake of food banking has come to occupy a prominent and highly contested space in contemporary political debate in the UK (Lambie-Mumford and Dowler, 2014). In their analysis of representations of food banking in UK print media, Wells and Caraher (2014) highlight how the growth in reporting on food banks led to a ‘frame contest’ between government ministers, church leaders and the Trussell Trust as to the reasons underpinning the increase in food banks and food bank use. Building on this analysis, it is also possible to identify a series of important shifts in both the focus and tenor of this debate, and in particular in the positions adopted by government and key food bank agencies concerning the place of food banks in the on-going reconfiguration of state/civil society relations – captured in discussions of the ‘Big Society’ – and the relationships between food banking and the Coalition and Conservative governments’ programmes of welfare ‘reform’. Taken together, these debates suggest that UK food banks, and the Trussell Trust in particular, have become increasingly politicised in recent years, opening an important space of contestation over the nature and impacts of welfare reform, though the political construction of food banking more widely – and of food bank users in particular – remains highly ambiguous. Here, we examine these debates as they have unfolded over the past four to five years.

‘Little platoons’ of the big society

Responding to the then recent and dramatic rise in the number of food banks in the UK, in early 2010 senior Conservative politicians, including the then Prime Minister David Cameron, welcomed the growing prominence of the UK’s largest food bank franchise – the ‘fantastic Christian charity’ – the Trussell Trust, claiming it as the very ‘epitome of the Big Society’ (Conservative Home, 2012). Expanding on this highly supportive posture, in the parliamentary debate on food banks on 18 December 2013, Esther McVey MP (Conservative) ‘welcomed’ the growth in the Trust’s food bank network, claiming food banks as a ‘sign of Britain’s social fabric’ and demonstrating what community-minded neighbourliness can achieve (see Downing and Kennedy, 2014), whilst the centre-right Jubilee Centre praised them for providing a worked through example of ‘a system of welfare that is decentralised ... more charitable, personal and relational’ rather than centralised and state funded (Tame, 2014; see also Adam Smith Institute, 2014).

Though the Coalition government’s positive response to the rise in food banking can clearly be understood in relation to the fact that the UK’s food banks were almost wholly reliant upon the generosity of volunteers and public donations, with little to no funding (initially at least) from the state, the modus operandi of the Trussell Trust also seemed in keeping with Conservative/Coalition aims to further restructure British welfare along neoliberal lines: continuing the shift from universal provision to a mixed welfare economy more closely focused on the most ‘deserving’ (rather than only those in need), and confronting head on the continuing ‘abuse’ of the welfare system by an apparently

growing population of the undeserving or feckless. Most obviously, the Trussell Trust's time-limited referral system – within which those in need must first be issued a voucher by health or social service professionals, with each client able to claim only three vouchers in any six month periodⁱ – was welcomed by government as a device that sifts out those in 'genuine need' from those seeking to 'take advantage of free food' (Lord Freud cited in Morris, 2013), avoids the dangers of 'welfare dependency' (Morse, 2013), and ensures benefit payments are not spent on 'nonessential' items (Butler, 2013; see also, Alec Shelbrooke MP, Con. in Williams, 2013). The acceptability of the voucher system, within the Trust, however, is far more complex, and while it includes arguments against dependency and possible abuses of the system (by both 'opportunists' and welfare officials permanently 'parking' individuals on foodbank registers); support for the voucher system is couched in more pragmatic and technocratic arguments about fairness and efficiency in food distribution and stock management; ensuring standardised delivery across the network and avoiding the potentially stigmatising discretionary politics of foodbank volunteers 'sounding out' client stories.

Site of politicisation

Unsurprisingly, perhaps, just as the emergence of food banks in the UK was initially welcomed by government, the same period saw growing disquiet amongst left-leaning voices in the media over precisely these issues. Hence, whilst Conservative members of parliament and ministers praised the Trussell Trust, critics raised concerns that the rise of food banks was not only diverting attention from the responsibilities of government to provide for those worst affected by austerity, but also risked legitimating the further neoliberalisation of the UK welfare system: with voluntary sector organisations replacing state welfare services, and those same organisations apparently embracing the latest tenets of neoliberal welfare reform (increased rationing, stricter distinctions between 'deserving' and 'undeserving' claimants, and – given the apparent inability of welfare recipients to exercise individual responsibility – a shift from cash to in-kind provision) (Butler, 2013; Cooper and Dumbleton, 2013; Cooper et al., 2014; Perry et al., 2014; Williams, 2013).

Though this critique continues, over the past two to three years, the position of both government and the Trussell Trust has changed significantly. Most obviously, as the numbers using food banks have continued to rise, and the Trust's figures have shown an ever increasing number of food bank users to be turning to them either because of a reduction (through, for example, the imposition of benefit sanctions) or delay (resulting from the introduction of Universal Credit, benefit caps and changes to housing benefits) in benefit payments, the Trust has increasingly drawn attention to the obvious correlation between the rise in food bank users and processes of welfare 'reform' (Cooper and Dumbleton, 2013; Trussell Trust, 2013). As the Trust has grown increasingly critical of these changes (Mould, 2015), the government has in turn grown increasingly critical of the Trussell Trust, though this critique has moved through a number of stages.

Question the evidence

In the first of a series of statements charting the shift from enthusiastic support to open opposition, in May 2013, Ed Davey MP (Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change) maintained his support for the voluntary ethos evident in the UK's food banks, for example, but denied any connection

between the rise in food bank use and welfare reform (cf. Goldberg and Green, 2009; Loopstra et al., 2015; Tarasuk et al., 2014 for econometric analyses that establish clear links between welfare reform and food bank usage in the UK and elsewhere):

People who run food banks are doing an extremely good job and deserve credit for their work. However, it is completely wrong to suggest that there is a statistical link between the Government's benefit reforms and the provision of food banks... (HC Deb 14 May 2013 c511)

As the Trust continued to release figures documenting further rises in the number of food bank clients suffering a reduction or delay in their benefits, and – spurred on perhaps by the government's denial of any connection between the two – became increasingly outspoken about the effects of welfare reform, the response of ministers became more openly hostile. In December 2013, for example, Iain Duncan Smith, Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, accused the Trust of 'political scaremongering' to garner support for its franchise, and argued that the Trust and others were wrong to 'repeatedly' 'link the growth of your network to welfare reform', whilst a senior Department of Works and Pensions source accused the Trust of 'misleading and emotionally manipulative publicity-seeking' (Fisher, 2014).

Ideological and moral defence

In February 2014, an open letter from Anglican Bishops calling upon the government to act on a national crisis in UK hunger of its own making, made it clear the government had failed to win over their critics. The result was a shift in tack, with government moving away from its previous denial of any connection between the rise in food banking and processes of welfare reform, to an explicit defence of those reforms as not only necessary but just. As the Prime Minister David Cameron put it his statement on 'the moral case for welfare reform':

Seeing these reforms through is at the heart of our long-term economic plan – and it is at the heart too of our social and moral mission in politics today. (Cameron, 2014)

Building the case for reform, Iain Duncan Smith and others have subsequently sought to reframe an explanation of the rise of food banks in the UK via a discourse of worklessness, dependency and irresponsibility, moving from a construction of those using food banks as vulnerable but also inadequate to something altogether more threatening (Slater, 2013). Hence, whilst Iain Duncan-Smith initially argued that it is 'ridiculous to assume that every single person who goes to a food bank does so because of what the Department for Work and Pensions does... These are often people with dysfunctional lives – people who have been caught in drug addiction and family breakdown, people who have a serious illness and are not claiming benefits and get into difficulty' (cited in Holehouse, 2014), his colleagues have gone further; drawing upon imaginaries of a 'persistent problematic group of people' (Sarah Newton MP, Con 2014 cited in Demianyk, 2014) who are financially reckless (Michael Gove MP, Con cited in BBC News, 2013), who do not know how to cook or budget (Lady Jenkin, Con cited in Chorley, 2014) and are long-term dependent (see Currie, 2014).

Ironically, perhaps, given the Trust's continuing use of a voucher system designed to filter out exactly such claimants, these attacks on the undeserving welfare dependent have recently been extended by some Conservative Members of Parliament to renewed attacks on food banks themselves, which have in turn been accused of instilling 'habits of dependency' (Paul Maynard MP, Con in Morse, 2013). But

in the main, the government's ire is currently focused on food bank users, who have become increasingly stigmatised as members of a persistent and threatening underclass, rather than food banks or food bank volunteers; whose voluntary ethic remains a mainstay of small state conservatism even if their political views appear increasingly at odds with other Conservative values.

We have traced these debates, albeit schematically, because we believe they demonstrate the shifting, and increasingly ambiguous, construction of food banking in mainstream UK politics. Over the past four to five years, the Trussell Trust has moved from being an organisation praised by government for articulating their vision of the Big Society, to one denigrated for perpetuating welfare dependency. The Trust itself has also increasingly shifted from being an avowedly apolitical organisation, to one which has become increasingly vociferous in its criticism of government welfare policy (Mould, 2015), with the data it regularly releases on food bank use providing a key resource for those wishing to galvanise public debate around the damaging impacts of welfare reform and wider austerity programmes. More recently, in response perhaps to a framing of food bank users as irresponsible and feckless, the Trust have also sought to focus attention on the inequities of low wage and insecure employment and zero-hour contracts, drawing attention to the growing numbers of working households also using their food banks. At the same time, while the Trust's continued use of a referral system seems insufficient to stave off criticism from the political right, that system continues to incur disapproval from the political left because it appears to uphold key tenets of a neoliberalising welfare system – recognition of the 'deserving' user, time limitations on support supposedly to avoid 'dependency', and benefits in kind rather than cash so as to avoid 'inappropriate' consumption. Despite the growing scale of public debate around food banking in the UK, and notwithstanding the recent attention paid to issues of low pay and zero hour contracts, the parameters of this debate have also remained remarkably limited. On the one hand, rather than on the UK's wider emergency food landscape, attention has been almost wholly focused upon the activities and opinions of the Trussell Trust, which has become a privileged source for the UK news media when seeking 'news' about food poverty. On the other hand, discussions concerning the rise in food banking, and the utility of food banks as a means of responding to problems of food poverty, have remained almost entirely framed within considerations of the impact of welfare reform: not coincidentally, perhaps, the Trussell Trust's own preferred explanation for this rise, and one which fits with their preferred response of time-limited assistance designed to deal with 'temporary' problems of benefit receipt.

The contradictory dynamics of food banking: Spaces of political transformation and action

To what extent, then, do these broader criticisms of the political and moral landscapes of food banking connect to the politics of food bank organisations and food bank volunteers 'on the ground'? In the remainder of this paper, we use the case-study of Levington Foodbankⁱⁱ – a franchise of the Trussell Trust in a fairly affluent city (pop. 125,000) in the South of England – to provide a more grounded assessment of the politics of food banking in the UK. For evidence, we draw upon participant observation as a volunteer and team leader (AUTHOR) and 11 transcribed interviews with volunteers and staff, alongside over 60 in-depth conversations with food bank volunteers and clients conducted over an 18-month period and documented in a field diary. Ethnography as a volunteer in a food bank provides excellent territory for participant observation but requires a determination both to maintain critical reflexivity and to ensure appropriate ethical underpinning of the research. Some of the ethical and methodological tensions – for example, negotiating appropriate access and consent – are fairly standard in this kind of research. Others, however, were less straightforward: attempting to ensure

that the research process did not add to any stigma experienced by service users; deploying due sensitivity in the use of recording devices; ensuring appropriate self-other relations, especially with clients but also with other volunteers and dealing appropriately with personal concerns over compliance with the rules of the food bank. These issues are dealt with in much more depth elsewhere (see Williams, in press).

Over the past few years, Levington Foodbank has become a major part of the local welfare landscape, with over 100 referral agencies of which the local authority is the largest. Between April 2013 and March 2014, the food bank provided 3981 people three days' emergency food, compared to 2886 in the same period 2012–2013, with the number of people fed increasing by 116% over the past two years. At the time of writing, the food bank has over 100 volunteers and employs two part-time staff. During 2014, they received 50,000 kg of donated food in total, and on average provided food for 92 people a week.

Whilst academic narratives have tended to frame food bank activities, and food bank volunteering in particular, as a largely depoliticising device, the evidence gathered from Levington suggests the relationships between volunteering and the formation of ethical and political values and practices are much more fragmented and variegated than has previously been argued. Indeed, we argue that food bank volunteering is best conceptualised as a highly ambiguous 'space of encounter' across lines of social difference which can reinforce, rework or transform existing ethical and political attitudes, beliefs and identities (Valentine, 2008 cited in Lawson and Elwood, 2013). Our analysis highlights the indeterminacy and dynamic nature of these encounters, and of the spaces of food banking, and while we show how food bank volunteering can reconfigure ethical and political sensibilities towards more progressive ends, we also draw attention to the limits of these encounters and the often far from progressive dynamics they may continue to articulate.

As is common in third sector organisations, Levington Foodbank attracts volunteers and staff who frame their involvement in relation to a diverse, sometimes contrasting, set of personal, therapeutic, religious and political motivations (Muers and Britt, 2012). Volunteers were predominantly white and middle class, aged between 50 and 70 and retired from paid work, although there were a smaller number of students and young professionals. There were slightly more female than male volunteers, and very few had used the foodbank themselves. As an early member of the Trussell Trust, Levington Foodbank was setup in 2008 as a partnership between three local churches, and the composition of volunteers largely reflects this church-based volunteer network. The food bank operates out of a Methodist church in the centre of the city; team leaders and staff members are required to be Christians; there is a short time of prayer before opening times led by the team leader; some volunteers pray with clients if asked to do so and adjacent to the space where clients sit and drink refreshments leaflets advertising the Christian basis of the foodbank can be found alongside multi-agency information and advice on debt advice, counselling, and homelessness, amongst other topics.

Despite these clear Christian roots, in recent years, the food bank has adopted a 'postsecular' stance (Cloke and Beaumont, 2012); welcoming increasing numbers of volunteers of other or no religious faith, including those who simply want to 'do something to help' after reading articles about food banks in the national and local press, and those whose primary motivation is ideological – embodying solidarity in the face of welfare austerity. Together with the 'apolitical' marketing of the Trussell Trust franchise,ⁱⁱⁱ which has studiously avoided alignment with any particular political party, volunteers

expressed an assortment of ethical, theo-ethical and political standpoints, especially on issues of welfare, poverty and austerity:

It is a good thing food is not handed out willy-nilly to 'benefit scroungers', substance abusers, and those too lazy to work. We don't want to breed dependency, we want people to change. (Will, 30s, volunteer in the warehouse sorting tins of donated food, April 2014)

I don't think it is all necessarily the government's fault. People have become too greedy, everyone, rich and poor. It is up to us to help those who really are in need. (Iain, 60s, Team leader, January 2014)

I don't think it is about politics, it is about fulfilling need there and then (Eve, 40s, volunteer, April 2014)

How can it be right when a family where both parents are 'in work' cannot afford to feed their children. Zero hours and irregular hours jobs means...families cannot budget... even if it is agreed that they need benefits, the payments aren't made in time ... The number of people we feed is increasing week by week - surely this shows that policies are not working. (Barbara, 60s, volunteer, February 2014)

From the views expressed in these statements, the criticism that the political ethos among food bank volunteers works to depoliticise food poverty clearly has some purchase, and helps explain the explicit positioning of food poverty in the alleged 'non-political' domain of charitable citizenship and accompanying right-facing discourses of the dangers of 'dependency' and helping 'those in genuine need'. However, such a categorisation overlooks the diverse moral and political positionalities claimed and performed among different groups of volunteers. While the majority of volunteers initially did not regard either themselves or the work of the food bank as in any way 'politically minded', volunteers held wide-ranging views on the politics of welfare; ranging from broad support for welfare reforms and accompanying narratives of individual responsibility, to strongly anti-government views that highlighted structural injustices in housing and labour markets.

In fact the specific political sensibility claimed and performed by volunteers cannot easily be read off from an individual's self-identification, be that a religious (one's denominational or theological position) or political (broad affiliation and/or party political membership) identity. Rather than assuming fixed, or immutable positions, analyses of political sensibilities must take into account the performative role of practice and dialogue in the configuration of political standpoints. Our interviews suggest that individual standpoints on 'deservingness', 'poverty' and 'dependency', for example, all emerged and were (re)negotiated in situ; through participation in the range of affective atmospheres produced through the practices of volunteers, their dialogue with other volunteers and clients, and an individual's interpellation in wider political debates surrounding food banking. The following excerpt from our field diaries illustrates this well:

It was a quiet session in the distribution centre and without clients volunteers were discussing what they thought of the voucher system. Overall there was a very positive endorsement. One volunteer, who also worked for Christians Against Poverty - a debt advice organisation - emphasised 'the need for assessment to make sure people are not taking advantage'. 'We need to tackle root causes, the problem we find is that people push bills under the carpet. I think the government welfare reforms are a step in the right direction'. The team leader

agreed. With this, three volunteers in unison interjected by insisting that ‘the problem is that companies are not paying staff enough’, and ‘then you’ve got zero-hour contracts and you don’t know if you’re working, if you’ve got money to buy food or not...’

Thus, food banks may be best understood as something of a ‘melting pot’ of disparate political sensibilities, and ones within which the particular configuration of political and moral positions claimed and performed may vary session by session depending on the mix of volunteers involved.

Our interviews also make clear that food banks may also be understood as (sometimes) providing a space of ‘micro-political’ transformation (Lawson and Elwood, 2013: 6) in which the political sensibilities of volunteers undergo significant change, as these examples – moving around people’s reflections on themes of personal responsibility, blame, and the most appropriate responses to need – demonstrate:

I have become more aware of how our government seems to push through measures without really thinking about the consequences and the damaging effect on some people. In particular the so called ‘bedroom tax’ ... or the way people can be penalised for trying to find employment. There is a lack of real understanding and compassion (Esther, 50s, volunteer, January 2014)

I have certainly become more aware of how some people are really struggling. I have become more aware of the short-comings of the benefit system ... [and] of how redundancy, accidents and poor health can have a ‘knock on effect’ and almost destroy people (Abby, 60s, volunteer, March 2014)

Volunteers shared experiences of becoming ‘sensitised’ to people’s stories – an experience that led to a sharper perception of broader structural issues, including, zero-hour contracts/ underemployment, delays and cuts to welfare payments, and the impact of specific welfare reforms, such as the ‘Bedroom Tax’. While for some this sensitisation clearly mapped on to existing political proclivities, for others, the experience of working in the food bank came to disrupt received views on poverty:

I think my approach was quite patronising when I first started. I had an idea that it’s a good thing to do, to help people in need. Which is fine. But ...I don’t think I’d really thought about it in terms of poverty particularly ...I didn’t have any strong political views; I wasn’t very politically aware. And I think gradually it made me look at the bigger picture, and start to look at some of the causes. Whereas initially I was motivated a lot by a sense of just grace, I suddenly became more integrated with a sense of injustice and feeling that more needed to be done to address the causes of that. And actually, just the experiences of sitting down and talking to people had an effect on what I did with the rest of my life. (Lydia, 20s, volunteer, March 2013)

As she recounted her experiences at the food bank, Lydia also charted a significant shift in her understandings of poverty and of the most appropriate response to problems of poverty: from one rooted in Christian conservative attitudes (privileging an avowedly ‘apolitical’ and ‘patronising’ understanding of charitable giving to the ‘needy’) to more explicit, and explicitly politicised, expression of faith that embraced the need to ‘do something’ at a structural as well as a local level. Whilst this emergent framing shaped how she understood and responded to problems of food poverty in the food bank, considerably changing how she related with clients, for example, it also helped effect

broad changes in her life; as she took up a part-time paid position as an administrator at the food bank and at a local homeless charity. Just as for this volunteer her work at the food bank led to broader changes which 'spilled out' in to other areas of her life, so too the work of volunteers often 'spilled out' beyond the food bank itself; with volunteers taking food back to client's homes (by hand or by car) if people were unable to carry the food parcels themselves, for example, or – in rare cases – with volunteers purchasing toasters and kettles at their own expense for clients who did not have the means to cook the food provided.

In considering how these changes in political sensibilities – and resultant practice – came about, five key processes seem to be at work. First and foremost, it is essential to acknowledge the agency of foodbank clients and their role in shaping volunteers' perceptions and attitudes towards issues of 'food poverty'. Here, the overt roles of giver and receiver in a 'charitable' environment can potentially override and close down opportunities for meaningful engagement, whilst the manner in which clients narrate their story, as they must in any welfare encounter in order to maximise the chance of a successful application for assistance (Rowe, 1999) also plays a key role in shaping volunteers' perceptions and attitudes towards issues of 'food poverty'. In practice, many clients worked hard to navigate the roles that may, even if inadvertently, have been ascribed to them by volunteers, and explicitly challenged dominant media stereotypes of foodbank users as somehow responsible for their own plight (through bad decisions, behaviours and motivations) or as victims of personal misfortune (benefit sanctions and delays). Instead, they sought to give volunteers insight into the lived experiences of systemic processes of labour and housing market insecurity, for example, or the Kafkaesque system welfare recipients must increasingly negotiate:

I was made redundant 10 days ago – with no pay for the month I'd worked, no notice, and no redundancy pay. I signed on but got no help with housing costs for 3 months. I have no savings and no overdraft left. I haven't received any benefits yet. (Max, food bank client, October 2013)

They [city council] don't believe you. They told me that I couldn't get a voucher and that I should ask my family to help me. (Stacey, food bank client, two children, June 2015)

I used to work for a large fundraising company ... work[ing] for 52 hours for only »152 a week! I had to quit, they were making me start work at 7 and come back at 11 at night, driving us up to Bristol or Plymouth but only getting paid for the time we were on the street signing people up ... Now I [work at] Burger King but won't get paid until the end of the month. (Patrick, food bank client, July 2014)

It pisses me off how stupid the policy is. They [city council] are giving me a Discretionary Hardship payment, but it will take over a week. The landlord evicts me this Thursday and me and my kid will be homeless. I told them that, and they didn't seem to care. (Neil, food bank client, August 2014)

They [city council] don't really care, they just shunt you around from agency to agency... it seems policy now to tell people simply to go to [the homeless day centre] and they will sort you out with a food voucher. (Luke, food bank client, September 2014)

These accounts provide insight into an array of 'un-caring' encounters in welfare institutions alongside experiences of precarity in the labour and housing market. This has important implications for

longitudinal understandings for foodbank spaces being one in a series of welfare encounters, one that might even be less demanding or stigmatising compared to other welfare bureaucracies (see Douglas et al., 2015; also see Garthwaite et al., 2015). The possibilities for reflexive engagement between volunteers and clients therefore also depends on clients' own ethics of engagement – the specific meanings attached to, and experiences derived from, the foodbank environment (fear, care, shame, gratitude), including, for example, individual political beliefs, and the position of charitable food within everyday foodscapes and survival strategies (Miewald and McCann, 2014).

Second, the day-to-day improvisations of care enacted in the food bank seemed to open out a range of emotional and affective relations, often involving experiences of unexpected sociality and connection between volunteers and clients (Darling, 2011), that in turn often disrupted, or at least temporarily suspended, more traditional roles of giver and receiver, volunteer and client, benefactor and beneficiary (see also Llewellyn, 2011). Hence, we observed how both clients and volunteers frequently adopted a range of strategies seemingly designed to reduce inequalities of power between them, including humour, talking about shared interests, previous holidays or sport, for example, or continuing to deepen their relationships beyond one of 'volunteer' and 'client' after 'closing time'; meeting for coffee to continue a conversation initiated at the food bank, for example.

Third, the dialogue between volunteers and clients constituted a space of encounter in which both parties began to reflect on the causes of and experiences of poverty, the role of food banks in responding to these problems, and constructions of deserving/undeserving and 'dependency' constructed through the media, for example:

I really dislike the language of deserving and undeserving. I spent quite a long time talking to a guy who had quite a heavy criminal record ... He's been applying for job after job after job ... but he was being put in a box ... It's so frustrating... (Lydia, 20s, volunteer, March 2013)

At my age my views have been well informed already. But I suppose being here, chatting with people as to why they came the stories stay with you ... [and] when you watch those Benefit (Street) programmes... You realise they are sensationalist, and the reality is, very very different. Being here, you begin to get a deeper, more personal connection to it all. Previously my views just came from what I read in the papers or what I watched on TV. Being here put all of that into context, and gives you a different perspective on those sort of thing. (Elizabeth, 60s, volunteer, February 2015)

Elizabeth notes the significance of 'being here'; a physical affectivity attached to the food bank that lingered long after the event ('stories stay with you') and which helped debunk the 'sensationalist' representations of 'the poor' pervasive in British TV and print media (see Hill, 2015). Lydia also noted that she became interestingly critical of the Trussell Trust's own selective representation of 'client stories', suggesting that – in order to maintain widespread public support – the Trust actually tended to reinforce, rather than disrupt, constructions of deservingness by only showing the 'acceptable images of hunger':

My personal frustration is that I think it [the Trussell Trust] does still play into the deserving/undeserving poor card a bit too much and all the media requests we want are for 'are in work and families with young children,' and I think actually we could do more to challenge that... But that, potentially, would be quite damaging, quite risky... I think there are a lot of

supporters who do support foodbank on the basis of... on notions of... they still hold very strongly to notions of personal responsibility for situations (Lydia, 20s, volunteer, March 2013)

Fourth, it was common for such experiences to open out broader political conversations amongst groups of volunteers, who themselves came from various political standpoints and offered different explanations as to the reasons underpinning food bank use:

Inevitably, when you are talking to people in the distribution centre, you do end up having political conversations just because of the nature of when people are telling you they have been waiting for six weeks for their benefits (Lydia, 20s, volunteer, March 2013)

This raises questions of the capacity for food banks to be conceptualised as constituting an emergent micro-public (Barnett, 2014), both in the space they create for communicative reasoning and reflexive engagement among volunteers, and also in the key role played by food banks – and their supporters – in the mobilisation (and mediation) of new public concern on issues of poverty and hunger in the UK: although questions also remain about inclusivity in terms of what discourses and whose voices are included or prioritised in these publics (see Moragues-Faus and Morgan's, 2015 work on 'spaces of deliberation' in sustainable urban food systems).

Lastly, political conversations were in part mediated through a number of 'technologies', including documentation that encouraged food bank users to 'tell your story', the food bank website, newsletters, local and national press releases, calls to participate and contribute to Trussell Trust research and policy recommendations, and meetings with local authorities over localised welfare arrangements, for example (Figures 1 and 2).

[Figures 1 and 2 insert here]

The (increasingly) political tone of the Trussell Trust, and the ways in which this is negotiated on the ground by individual food banks in their public and internal communications (newsletters, referral meetings, media reports), is evident here in one of Levington Foodbank's recent newsletters, focusing on the misreporting of welfare issues and damaging constructions of the 'deserving' and 'undeserving' poor. Frequently alongside updates on local foodbank usage and appeal for donations in the local press, Foodbank managers criticised government 'sanction' policy and changes to jobseekers allowance under the roll-out of Universal Credit. Whilst such technologies may shape the propensity for different individuals to volunteer with a food bank, in Levington at least they would seem both to reflect and re-enforce the food bank's role as an increasingly important voice in local 'anti-poverty' campaigning work, and a key 'gatekeeper' in the evidence drawn upon in these campaigns.

For many of the individuals volunteering at Levington Foodbank, then, their work as volunteers seemed to act as a catalyst for a transformation in their ethical and political sensibilities, with real implications for the relationships they forged with clients within the food bank, and for work they did beyond the food bank. Far from acting as a 'moral safety valve' that placated energies for political campaigning against the pernicious injustice of hunger in 21st-century Britain (Poppendieck, 1998), for some individuals volunteering invigorated a desire for wider structural change and social justice. Significantly, a few individuals who had previously identified as apolitical, disinterested or conservative, articulated how reflecting on clients' narratives had led to a sharper emotional response to the failings of government policy and a greater willingness to engage in various forms of 'anti-poverty' activism, ranging from lobbying local and national MPs to joining local anti-austerity groups

in the city. Crucially, a number of volunteers became catalysts in their wider social networks: engaging and challenging discourses surrounding poverty and deservedness, and working to recruit others volunteers and supporters willing to speak out about issues of food poverty among their own social networks:

I think I was also quite shocked by some of the attitudes within the church as well. A lot of the language of 'it's their responsibility, they are in this situation, they have created it,' I didn't see that matched up ... [and] I wanted to help people see that (Lydia, 20s, volunteer, March 2013)

Importantly, a number of volunteers were also acutely aware of the ambiguities relating to campaigning against austerity and welfare reform, whilst working for a food bank; when food banks, including those franchised to the Trussell Trust, have themselves been criticised for responding to problems of food poverty that are of the government's making, and for filling the gaps in welfare provision that should remain the state's responsibility. Reflecting on these ambiguities, volunteers were explicit in recognising the dangers of food banks becoming an integral part of the new welfare landscape, but rejected both simple pragmatism ('if food banks do not intervene those most in need will not eat') and any either choice between incorporation or responding to need (see also Williams et al., 2012). Instead, as this volunteer put it:

we are in a slightly strange situation because actually we'd love to put ourselves out of business...I kind of see we've got a dual role and that's where I think being part of the Trussell Trust is really helpful. A) we are feeding people, which really needs to be done, but B) we are shouting about the fact that actually it's not acceptable that we are and we shouldn't have to, and there are long-term causes that people need to look at (Lydia, 20s, volunteer, March 2013)

This illustrates the care-justice transition, that is, the potentiality for seemingly mundane voluntary or charitable engagement ('feeding people') to spill over into more politicised forms of advocacy and campaigning ('shouting about the fact that actually it's not acceptable'). Yet, the desire to 'put ourselves out of business' has been a common refrain for the past 35 years of charitable food banking and in several countries coincided with ever increasing institutionalisation and corporatisation of food aid (Riches, 1986). This is a critical juncture therefore in which caution is required in order to avoid any naïve exaltation of the ability of food banks, staff and volunteers to reduce or 'solve' the food poverty question. Questions remain about the agency and coordination of local, national and international action on food poverty; experiments with different models of food provision, procurement and partnership in the meantime (including food cooperatives, solidarity purchasing groups and community gardening); the capacity of voluntary, even charitable, spaces of care to offer opportunities for ethical talk and performance that connect to wider transformative politics and praxis and lastly, the potential effectiveness of political mobilisations that seek to coalesce disparate campaigns in the areas of food, housing and labour, for example (Cloke et al., 2016).

The darker side of food banking

Evidence from Levington Foodbank therefore suggests that the politics of food bank volunteering should not be easily dismissed as depoliticising or parasitical on more radical activity. Instead, for many of the volunteers interviewed working at the food bank opened them to new encounters with people

in need which led them to revise or rework prior political sensibilities. For some this reworking extended beyond their work with food bank clients, to an engagement in broader anti-poverty campaigns, with volunteers fully aware of the ambiguity of their own position as a food bank volunteer in those campaigns.

This said, by no means all volunteers moved through this trajectory. Several, who identified as supporters of the Conservative Party, for example, were clearly alienated by the increasing politicisation of the Trussell Trust with at least one volunteer leaving the food bank because of this, whilst another commented:

At the Food Bank I see people who need help, I do not see ammunition for taunting a government which needs all the support it can get to restore some semblance of prosperity to the country, from which all may benefit ...I have often found annoying the occasional statements on the Trussell Trust Facebook page which seem to imply that there exists a universal duty to embrace the values of the Manchester Guardian and to imply that the nasty Tories are deliberately making life difficult for people (Peter, 60s, volunteer, February 2014)

Just as volunteering at a food bank by no means necessarily leads to progressive forms of 'politicisation', the modus operandi of food banks can 'politicise' volunteers in another direction; whereby individuals learn to accept as necessary and just a set of exclusionary technologies predicated on calculations of 'deservingness', rationing and 'dependency'. Here it is important to recognise these deeper contradictions within which Trussell Trust, and some independent food banks in the UK, continue to operate. Two such contradictions are especially apparent.

First, in terms of challenging corporate agribusiness and retail, very little is currently done by Levington Foodbank around the wider politics of the food system. Although for the last two years, the foodbank has developed strong links with, and weekly donations from, a local food organisation which is committed to ensuring that surplus but fresh in-date food (for example, eggs, milk, bread, fruit and vegetables) is redistributed within the community rather than going to landfill, like many Trussell Trust food banks, Levington Foodbank also relies for a significant proportion of their donations on Tesco. Some volunteers even acknowledged the contradiction that the food bank operates within the conventional (capitalist) food chain system, distributing 'surplus' or donated commercial products to those who cannot afford the (escalating) market price. The belief in the 'tried and tested' modus operandi of the Trussell Trust, alongside practical concerns about storage and resource capacity, however, led the foodbank to foreclose opportunities to engage in alternative food networks, such as allotments and community growing scheme, for the moment.

Second, while the Trussell Trust have increasingly criticised the UK government for drawing distinctions between 'deserving' and 'undeserving' welfare claimants, and the increasingly impersonal, bureaucratic and often outright punitive ways in which the benefits regime and especially benefit sanctions are managed (Mould, 2015), the Trust's own referral system constructs exactly these distinctions, and sometimes seems to be managed in very similar ways. Whilst the early adoption of a voucher referral system may be understood as one way in which the Trust sought to reassure a diverse constituency of volunteers and donors that its food banks would feed only those in 'genuine need', and discourage dependency, the adoption of such a system can also clearly be understood as both drawing legitimacy from, and further legitimating, discourses that hide their own ideological values within an increasingly technocratic welfare system (Trudeau and Veronis, 2009). It might also be

understood as a form of ‘moral outsourcing’ (May, 2014) – in which food bank volunteers are freed from the moral responsibility of having to decide who is and is not deserving of assistance (enabling them to claim a more comfortable, ‘non-judgemental’ stance) because these decisions are made for them in advance by trained ‘welfare professionals’ (whose own moral judgements are obscured by technocratic management systems). When strictly enforced on the ground, such a system can seem every bit as impersonal, bureaucratic and damaging as the system many of the Trust’s clients are falling victim to, as this extract from our field notes illustrates:

Sarah came late to the foodbank ... and explained she had been to the City Council but they would not give her a voucher. The Council had said her partner, who was sleeping in ‘Tent City’ (a homeless camp), should support her as he was working. Sarah explained she was pregnant, and had no money for food over the weekend ... I had to explain that the foodbank operates a voucher system – we usually only serve people who have been referred to us. But I stressed that *we could see what we can do* ... Knowing that other volunteers would not be keen to ‘break the rules, as it sets a precedent that will be passed around by word of mouth that you can just show up and get food’ (a message I heard regularly when I first started volunteering), I asked the team leader, Helen, for guidance. Helen explained that if I could find a referral agency who knows her then we could give Sarah food. I went through our list of referral agencies with Sarah to see if she knew any. She didn’t.

Next I rang Sarah’s accommodation provider... Would they be willing to give the green light to allow us to give Sarah three days’ worth of food?... They agreed ... [and] I explained to Helen we had authorisation from Sarah’s supported accommodation provider.

Helen asked if the agency was a voucher-holder. It was not on the list ... and Helen said, reluctantly, that they wouldn’t be able to give food without authorisation from a voucher referral holder. Sarah began to get anxious, body closed off, and looked to the floor... Helen explained again: ‘We are not authorised to give food over the counter to people without a voucher.’ At this point Sarah was getting more defensive. I felt embarrassed, as if I had raised her hopes and now dashed them.

Helen said we can make it a one off, but next time you must get a referral from a proper referral partner. Having been made to argue her case in front of all the volunteers on the other side of the table, who wanted to help but remained silent, by now Sarah just wanted to leave. Her tone went from one of thankfulness and full prose, to a mechanical yes/no - as if she was being told off by a teacher for bad behaviour. This was not surprising given the tone of the team leader’s well-meaning but firm rebuke: ‘you cannot come here without a voucher’.

Sarah was given a single person food parcel in the end. She was loading up the parcel in to her rucksack when the team leader asked her to move to allow the volunteers to pack up. Sarah left rushed. Helen reflected afterwards that ‘mercy triumphs over judgement and rules’. (July 2014)

Despite not abiding with the Trust’s official referral system, Sarah was eventually provided with food: offering another example of the ways in which (some) volunteers and staff on the front line in state, quasi-state and voluntary sector agencies will sometimes either actively resist, or find ways to subvert and work around, increasingly restrictive and exclusionary welfare systems (Williams et al., 2014b). Nonetheless, this account points to at least two concerns with the referral systems used by the Trussell

Trust and many of the UK's independent food banks. The first is the palpable anxiety Sarah experienced as she waited to see whether or not the food bank's volunteers would indeed 'bend the rules'. Once they had decided to do so, any relief Sarah may have felt was quickly replaced by feelings of embarrassment and shame as she was publicly admonished for placing the volunteer team in so awkward a position. Though Helen may have agonised and then congratulated herself on her 'mercy' as she took back the moral responsibility for determining whether or not Sarah should be fed, the guilt associated with such decisions is in effect out-sourced again – this time to Sarah, rather than to those responsible for maintaining the referral system, for forcing the volunteers to confront their own (potential) complicity in so obviously damaging and exclusionary a system. The second, is that such systems have become so entrenched, to the extent indeed that they seem to operate at the level of 'common sense' (Cresswell, 1996) – evident in the eagerness of (some) volunteers to so meticulously monitor the voucher system, concerns that failure to do so would set a dangerous precedent, and the obvious reluctance (but also sense of self-congratulatory 'mercy' when doing so) to break the rules. Food banks, seem in fact therefore to embody ethically complex and dynamic spaces of deliberation – whereby unstable and fluid sets of embodied encounter between clients and volunteers connect to, become mediated by, potentially disrupts but also sometimes actively re-enforce, the cold rationalisation of voucher welfare, deservingness and dependency.

Conclusions

This paper has demonstrated that the recent politics of food banking in the UK have been contested significantly on at least two levels. First, from a previous public articulation as favoured and well-supported icons of Big Society governance, food banks have been repositioned politically by government as troublesome reminders of the impacts and outcomes of austerity welfare. At this national level, then, the political construction of food banks has been transformed from enthusiastic endorsement to an often vitriolic dismissal as self-generating outlets for undeserving charity. A similar contestation has occurred at the local level, by which what was initially assumed as a relatively 'apolitical' expression of postsecular charity has become in places an incubator for conscientized and ethically aware activism. Alerted by phenomenologies of need and in-common encounters with those living in poverty, food bank volunteers have begun to recognise the need to go beyond charitable bystanding and care in order to engage with the wider issues of social justice with which they have been confronted. Care is obviously needed in generalising out the findings gathered from one Foodbank. Yet, if the dynamics explored here are replicated elsewhere, food banks might at the very least be understood as sites which can revitalise congregational and social networks that may initially be politically and theologically conservative.

This paper has also provided original ethnographic insight into the important, and hitherto neglected political and moral landscapes constructed inside UK food bank environments. Just as not all those volunteering in Trussell Trust food banks are critics of the government's welfare policies, our findings show how the Trussell Trust itself continues to use a voucher and referral system that draws upon, and risks further legitimating, a neoliberalisation of welfare based around ever stricter distinctions between the 'deserving' and 'undeserving', discourses of dependency, rationing and the replacement of cash payments with payments in kind. Though on the ground individual volunteers may sometimes resist or subvert such technologies, they may do so in ways which act to further stigmatise food bank users whilst more generally these technologies seem both deeply entrenched and rarely questioned.

Furthermore, the entrenchment of certain welfare technologies may 'desensitise' individuals and thereby 'politicise' in another direction: elevating the concerns of procedure and due process over responsiveness to need. At a broader level of analysis, food banks more generally also seem set to become a permanent feature of the UK's welfare landscape, with the Department of Work and Pensions continuing to 'signpost' people to foodbanks and their largest referral partners often being Local Authorities, whilst an increasing numbers of local authorities are either now funding food banks in their area directly, or drawing on food banks as a key part of local welfare assistance schemes.

The UK foodbank scene thus seems to have reached something of cross road; with the rapid rise in food banking generating significant political debate, but with food banks simultaneously having become institutionalised as permanent features of the welfare landscape and perhaps inadvertently providing an infrastructure that makes possible the transition from cash transfers and income assistance to food transfers and aid in kind as a new marker of UK social policy. If the politicisation of food banking on the national and local level stagnates, we might therefore expect that the legitimacy of charitable food assistance in the UK will become normalised as it has in other contexts (Wakefield et al., 2013; Warshawsky, 2010). If, however, food banks continue to facilitate spaces of encounter that can, even if only partially, rework, reinforce and generate new and progressive political sensibilities among food bank volunteers and clients, then there is scope for food banks to connect with, and help catalyse, wider food justice campaigns that seek to address deeper inequalities in the food system (Wekerle, 2004). Even if only a fraction of the Trussell Trust's 40,000 volunteers became politicised in and through their activities at food banks, then there are significant opportunities for activist groups to collaborate with what might otherwise be thought of as 'unusual' suspects (religious 'publics' and charitable food providers) who are more usually seen as barriers to more radical approaches to a more socially just and ecologically sustainable food system. Developing such broad-based alliances will require significant work, and a revaluation of approach in a number of food banks, but hold real promise and are crucial to secure longer term political change on issues of food, hunger and welfare.

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ⁱ Voucher use is monitored via a database and for those clients who have received more than three vouchers foodbank staff contact the referral partner to ensure the client is receiving adequate support from relevant social service and health agencies to help address the crisis. Longer term support is available in exceptional circumstances (for example, asylum seekers and those with no recourse to public funds).

ⁱⁱ Pseudonyms have been used to protect the identity of the foodbank and all volunteers, clients and referral agencies.

ⁱⁱⁱ Much more can be said about the political theology of the Trussell Trust foodbank Network than is possible here – but see Allen (2015) for a critical account.